

ASSAULT ON ANNAPURNA
(VOICED VERSION IN TAPE LIBRARY)

INTRO: A TEAM OF AMERICAN WOMEN MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS IS IN NEPAL PREPARING FOR AN ASSAULT ON ANNAPURNA -- ONE OF THE HIGHEST AND MOST DIFFICULT PEAKS IN THE HIMALAYAS. VOA'S SOUTH ASIA BUREAU CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN HAS SENT THE FOLLOWING REPORT.

VOICE: THE LEADER OF THE TEN-MEMBER EXPEDITION IS 33-YEAR-OLD ARLENE BLUM, WHO WHEN SHE'S NOT OUT CLIMBING MOUNTAIN'S IS A BIOCHEMIST STUDYING ENVIRONMENTAL CHEMICALS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY. A VETERAN CLIMBER, ARLENE HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF TWELVE EXPEDITIONS IN INDIA, AFRICA AND THE SOVIET UNION -- INCLUDING THE 1976 AMERICAN BI-CENTENNIAL EXPEDITION UP MOUNT EVEREST.

THE OTHER NINE CLIMBERS IN THE GROUP AVERAGE 35 YEARS OF AGE AND ALSO ARE EXPERIENCED MOUNTAINEERS. SEVERAL HAVE CLIMBED AMERICA'S MOUNT MCKINLEY...OTHERS HAVE SCALED PEAKS IN PERU, CANADA, PAKISTAN AND BOLIVIA. THEIR PROFESSIONS ARE AS VARIED AS THEIR CLIMBING EXPERIENCE: FOR EXAMPLE, AN OPHTHAMOLOGIST FROM SEATTLE, A COMPUTER PROGRAMMER AT STANDFORD UNIVERSITY, A STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING AND A PHYSICIST FROM PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA.

DURING A RECENT STOP-OVER IN NEW DELHI, TEAM LEADER BLUM DISCUSSED PLANS FOR THE CLIMB WITH REPORTER JIM MAGEE:

TAPE: CUT ONE -- BLUM

"OUR GROUP WILL CONSIST OF TEN WOMEN CLIMBERS -- THE FIRST GROUP OF AMERICAN WOMEN TO ATTEMPT AN EIGHT THOUSAND METER PEAK SUCH AS ANNAPURNA...AND TEN NEPALESE SHERPAS... A LIASON OFFICER AND SO FORTH. THERE WILL BE A TWO WOMAN FILM CREW AND A WOMAN BASE CAMP MANAGER HELPING OUR GROUP..."

VOICE: ARLENE BLUM MIGHT HAVE ADDED THAT IF SUCCESSFUL, HER GROUP WILL BECOME THE FIRST AMERICANS AND THE FIRST WOMEN TO MAKE IT TO THE TOP OF ANNAPURNA -- WHICH AT 26,558 FEET OR 8-THOUSAND-91 METERS IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT PEAKS IN THE HIMALAYAS. THE TEAM WILL BE ACCOMPANIED BY TWO HIGH ALTITUDE SHERPA WOMEN, OR SHERPANIS, AND THIS WILL MARK THE FIRST TIME NEPALI WOMEN HAVE PARTICIPATED IN AN ASSAULT ON A MAJOR NEPALI PEAK. THE WOMEN CLIMBERS BEGAN THEIR ASSAULT ON ANNAPURNA EARLIER THIS MONTH (AUGUST) FROM POKHARA, IN WESTERN NEPAL. BEFORE SETTING OUT, ARLENE BLUM EXPLAINED WHAT THE TEAM WILL BE DOING DURING THIS FIRST PHASE OF THEIR ATTEMPT.

TAPE: CUT TWO -- BLUM

"WE'LL BE NEEDING ABOUT ONE HUNDRED FIFTY PORTERS TO HELP US CARRY OUR GEAR TO BASE CAMP. THE TRIP TO BASE CAMP SHOULD TAKE ABOUT TEN DAYS. RIGHT NOW ITS MOONSOON IN POKHARA. WE'LL BEGIN AT ABOUT TWO THOUSAND FEET IN THE MONSOON AT POKHARA AND HOPEFULLY WALKING UP OUT OF THE MONSOON TO OUR BASE CAMP AT ABOUT FOURTEEN THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED FEET ON THE NORTH SIDE OF ANNAPURNA. WE'RE PLANNING TO SPEND THE NEXT FEW WEEKS ESTABLISHING CAMPS ONE AND TWO AND HOPE TO BE READY FOR A SUMMIT BID SOMETIME IN THE FIRST TWO WEEKS IN OCTOBER...."

VOICE: REPORTER MAGEE ASKED IF THERE WOULD BE ANY DIFFERENCE IN A WOMEN'S TEAM, COMPARED TO A MEN'S TEAM, IN MAKING AN ASSULT ON ANNAPURNA?

TAPE: CUT THREE -- BLUM

"WELL, I THINK THE DIFFERENCE IS THE WOMEN GET TO MAKE THE DECISIONS AND TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITIES. I WAS ON THE BI-CENTENNIAL EVEREST EXPEDITION, WHICH WAS A MIXED TEAM, AND IT DID SEEM THAT AT TIMES WHEN THINGS WERE DIFFICULT THE MEN TOOK OVER. AND SO BY HAVING AN ALL WOMEN'S TEAM, WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE ALL THE DECISIONS AND TAKE ALL THE RESPONSIBILITIES OURSELVES...

YOU MEAN THE MALE MOUNTAINEERS ARE CHAUVINISTS AS WELL?

NO, I WOULDN'T SAY THAT. IN FACT, I THINK MALE MOUNTAINEERS HAVE HAD MORE EXPERIENCE AND MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEADERSHIP AND SO OUR TRIP IS GIVING WOMEN AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LEADERSHIP."

VOICE: BEFORE LEAVING FOR POKHARA, MEMBERS OF THE EXPEDITION, ALL WELL MUSCLED AND FIT, SPENT SEVERAL WEEKS IN KATHMANDU ASSEMBLING GEAR AND ORGANIZING LOGISTICS FOR THE EXPEDITION. AND MANY OF THEM WERE WEARING THEIR FAMOUS TEE-SHIRTS WITH THE MOTTO: "A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE TOP" ABOUT THREE FOURTHS OF THE EIGHTY THOUSAND DOLLARS NEEDED TO FINANCE THE EXPEDITION WAS RAISED THROUGH SALE OF THOSE TEE-SHIRTS IN THE UNITED STATES.

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